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ABSTRACT

Between 1974 and 1979, nonpublic school enrollment in Maryland's Montgomery County rose 10 percent, while enrollment in the public school system decreased by 17 percent. A study undertaken to determine the reasons for this trend revealed that 53 percent of the parents who transferred their children from public to private schools did so because of concern for discipline, 44 percent sought better instruction in religion and values, 38 percent were dissatisfied with class size and individual attention given to students, 32 percent criticized student interest and achievement in public schools, 28.6 percent disapproved of the curriculum, and 3 percent sought to avoid racial integration. The data were obtained by a random telephone survey that sampled the attitudes of parents of 313 of the 1927 students who transferred from public schools to private schools. The survey questionnaire included both open-ended and multiple-choice items. (PGD)

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The Declining Enrollment Problem: A Study of Why Parents Withdraw Their Children From the Public Schools

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BACKGROUND

In the five-year period from 1974-79, nonpublic school enrollment in Montgomery County increased from 22,813 to 24,979, an increase of 10 percent. During the same period, Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) enrollment decreased by 17 percent from 124,324 to 102,633 (see Table 1). As a result of these enrollment patterns, questions were raised by staff and parents as to why Montgomery County residents to place their children in private schools. Of specific concern was the question of whether or not there exist any specific Board policies which cause parents to reject public education. To address this issue a multi-phase study was designed.

TABLE 1

Fall Enrollment Statistics: Montgomery County*
1974, 1978, and 1979

Level	1974	1978	1979	Percentage Change	
				Five Year	One Year
Kindergarten					
MC Public	8,502	5,395	5,351	-37.1	- 0.8
MC Private	970	1321	1576	+62.5	+19.3
Md. Public	54,879	43,418	42,583	-27.2	- 1.9
Md. Private	5,946	6,371	6,972	+17.3	- 9.4
Total	70,297	56,505	56,482	-19.7	-
Grades 1-12					
MC Public	115,113	101,413	96,571	-16.1	- 4.7
MC Private	17,980	18,624	18,617	+3.54	-
Md. Public	832,027	761,889	730,187	-12.2	- 4.2
Md. Private	105,959	104,496	103,806	- 2.0	- 0.7
Total	1,071,079	986,422	949,181	-11.4	- 3.8
Grand Total	1,163,788	1,067,922	1,032,254	-11.3	- 3.3

*Data for public schools from Facts About Maryland Public Education for each of the years 1974, 1978, and 1979.

Phase I, focuses on parents who have withdrawn their children from an MCPS public school for private school placement. Phase II of the study, now in progress, looks at the reasons why parents enter/or return a child to the Montgomery County Public Schools after withdrawing them from a nonpublic school in Montgomery County. Future work will begin to investigate the issue of why some parents never enroll their children in the public schools, but enroll them initially in private schools.

This paper presents the results from the first phase of the study. The project was directed by Dr. Sarah Edwards under the supervision of Dr. William Richardson. A full report on the Phase I findings is available from the Department of Educational Accountability of the Montgomery County Public Schools, Rockville, Maryland.

METHODOLOGY

SAMPLE

The respondents for Phase I of this study are parents who withdrew a child to attend private schools. This group, consisting of 1927 students withdrawn from MCPS for private school placement in Maryland between the end of the 1978-79 school year and March 21, 1980, constituted the universe from which

TABLE 2

Grade Levels of MCPS Withdrawals for Private School Placement
June 22, 1979 - March 21, 1980

Grade at the Time of Withdrawal	N	%
Head Start	15	.8
Kindergarten	145	7.5
1	414	21.5
2	129	6.7
3	120	6.2
4	127	6.6
5	130	6.7
6	103	5.3
7	186	9.7
8	100	5.2
9	176	9.1
10	144	7.5
11	80	4.2
12	27	1.4
Special Education	31	1.6
TOTAL	1,927	100.0

the sample was drawn. As can be seen in Table 2 the withdrawals of this group were proportionately larger for children entering Grade 1 (22 percent), Grade 7 (10 percent), and Grade 9 (9 percent).

These are natural breaks, i.e., many children attend kindergarten in a public school before enrolling in a private school that has no kindergarten; seventh grade is the time when children move to the junior high school; and the ninth grade is seen as the first year of high school with withdrawals tending to be high at that level so that children may start with their graduating class.

Selection of the sample for the survey was accomplished by randomly drawing students' names from the universe of 1927 records until a total of 313 telephone interviews had been completed with their parents or guardians. The random sample drawn for the survey fits closely with the universe for four characteristics: racial makeup, sex, grade, and geographic location. The findings reported here are based on a telephone survey of parents of these 313 students.

Telephone numbers for the sample came from the MCPS pupil data base. If the phone number was not available from this source or if it proved to be incorrect, attempts were made to locate phone numbers from various other sources. These sources included a call to the school from which the child was withdrawn, the local telephone directory, and Haines 1980 Maryland Suburban Criss-Cross Directory (Addressokey and Telokey).

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The survey instrument was developed based on a literature search and the types of information needed to respond to the study objectives. The questions address the reasons for withdrawal, incidents that led to withdrawal, length of time parents had considered the option to withdraw, parents' opinions of MCPS, and demographic and family characteristics of those who had exercised the option to withdraw their children from MCPS for nonpublic school placement. Both open-ended and multiple choice items were included. Questions about the reasons for withdrawals and opinions were open-ended on the assumption that any reading of possible answer choices in these areas might tend to bias the responses.

The responses for the open-ended questions were categorized, and SPSS crosstabulation programs were used to identify significant factors relating to the withdrawal of children from MCPS for nonpublic school placement. The results of these analyses are reported for the following factors: grade in school, sex of the child withdrawn, racial group membership, education level of the parents, administrative area, and the school rank based on the composite score of the last applicable systemwide test.

FINDINGS

REASONS FOR WITHDRAWAL

Parents were asked to name, in the order of their significance, the three most important reasons why they had withdrawn their children from MCPS in favor of private schools. To analyze the data, the reasons parents named were summarized and categorized. The categories are listed here and are further defined in Appendix A:

- Discipline
- Student Interest/Achievement
- School/MCPS Staff
- Class Size/Individualization
- Curriculum
- Parent Involvement
- Religion/Values
- Integration
- Other

Table 3 shows the importance alloted to each reason for withdrawal by parents. In the column headed Total, it shows the frequency with which each reason was named as being among the three most important reasons.

TABLE 3

Parents' Three Most Important Reasons for Withdrawal

Reasons for Withdrawal	Most Important N	Most Important %	Second Most Important N	Second Most Important %	Third Most Important N	Third Most Important %	Total N*	Total %
	308	100	271	100	206	100	308	100
Discipline	49	15.9	78	28.8	36	17.5	163	52.9
Religion/Values	74	24.0	28	10.3	32	15.5	134	43.5
Class Size/ Individualization	51	16.6	39	14.4	26	12.6	116	37.7
Student Interest/ Achievement	41	13.3	34	12.5	24	11.7	99	32.1
Curriculum	32	10.4	32	11.8	24	11.7	88	28.6
School/MCPS Staff	15	4.9	14	5.2	11	5.3	40	13.0
Parent Involvement	5	1.6	8	3.0	9	4.4	22	7.1
Integration	2	0.6	4	1.5	2	1.0	8	2.6
Other	39	12.7	34	12.5	42	20.4	115	37.3

*N=Number of respondents. Percentages based on multiple responses.

In the total group of parents interviewed, about one fourth (24 percent) named Religion/Values as their most important reason for transferring their children to nonpublic schools. This was followed by 17 percent who named Class Size/Individualization as most important and 16 percent placing Discipline at the top of the list. Discipline ranked highest both as the reason of second and third most importance.

When the three reasons were considered as a group, Discipline (at 53 percent*) was named more frequently than any other, with Religion/Values (at 44 percent*) in second place and Class Size/Individualization (38 percent*) ranked third.

The reasons for leaving MCPS are compared in Table 4 for white and minority families. Both groups left MCPS largely for the same reasons: Discipline, Religion/Values, and Class Size/Individualization.

Discipline

Discipline was the overriding reason given by (53 percent) parents for withdrawing their children from MCPS and placing them in nonpublic schools. Analyses by subgroups showed:

- Discipline was of greater concern to parents in schools ranked low achievement. Overall, discipline was named as most important by 65 percent of the parents in the lowest scoring schools and 40 percent of the parents in the highest scoring schools. ~~Also the results are inconclusive for the combined minorities because of the small sample size~~.
- Discipline was the top ranked reason for withdrawal in all three levels of parents education; however, it declined as the parents' level of education increased from High School (67 percent*) to College (56 percent*) to Advanced Studies (38 percent).
- The importance of discipline as a reason for withdrawal was not significantly different for male and female students withdrawn.

Religion/Values

Religion/Values ranked second (44 percent[1]) only to Discipline as the most frequently mentioned reason for MCPS transfers to nonpublic schools.

- Religion/Values was of greater concern in schools ranked low in achievement than in the top-ranked schools.

[1]Percentage based on multiple responses. (33.1 percent for Religion reasons; 10.4 percent for Values.)

TABLE 4

Parents' Three Most Important Reasons for Withdrawal
(White Families and Combined Minorities)

Reasons for Withdrawal	Most Important		Second Most Important		Third Most Important		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N*	%
White Families	265	100	237	100	182	100	265	100
Discipline	46	17.4	69	29.1	30	16.5	145	54.7
Student Interest/ Achievement	36	13.6	31	13.1	21	11.5	88	33.2
School/MCPS Staff	12	4.5	12	5.1	10	5.5	34	12.8
Class Size/ Individualization	43	16.2	31	13.1	24	13.2	98	37.0
Curriculum	25	9.4	29	12.2	22	12.1	76	28.7
Parent Involvement	5	1.9	8	3.4	8	4.4	21	7.9
Religion/Values	68	25.7	25	10.5	27	14.8	120	45.3
Integration	2	0.8	4	1.7	2	1.1	8	3.0
Other	28	10.6	28	11.8	38	20.8	94	35.5
Combined Minorities	N	%	N	%	N	%	N*	%
	43	100	34	100	24	100	43	100
Discipline	3	7.0	9	26.5	6	25.0	18	41.9
Student Interest/ Achievement	5	11.6	3	8.8	3	12.5	11	25.6
School/MCPS Staff	3	7.0	2	5.9	1	4.2	6	14.0
Class Size/ Individualization	8	18.6	8	23.5	2	8.3	18	41.9
Curriculum	7	16.3	3	8.8	2	8.3	12	27.9
Parent Involvement	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	4.2	1	2.3
Religion/Values	6	14.0	3	8.8	5	20.8	14	32.6
Integration	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Other	11	25.6	6	17.6	4	16.7	21	48.8

*N-Number of respondents. Percentages based on multiple responses.

- o Religion/Values ranked second as a reason for withdrawing their children from MCPS for all families as a group and for white families. It ranked third among the combined minorities.

- o About one fourth (24 percent) of the families listed Religion/Values as their reason of highest importance for withdrawing their children from MCPS for nonpublic school placement.

- o Teaching of Values in MCPS was criticized by 42 percent of the parents interviewed. Parents charged primarily that MCPS underemphasized values instruction (or neglected it completely) and that there was an inconsistency in values instruction in MCPS.

Class Size/Individualization

This area ranked third (38 percent*) in the frequency with which it was identified as a reason for withdrawal from MCPS.

- o Class Size/Individualization was a more frequently named reason for withdrawal of children from top scoring schools.

- o About half (51 percent) of the parents were pleased with MCPS teaching of students with diverse needs (22 percent were "very satisfied"; 29 percent, "satisfied"). Most of those who were critical said that MCPS lacked sufficient provisions for extra help and attention to individual needs. Some said that children were allowed to "slide by."

Noteworthy findings relating to the other reasons for withdrawal are summarized below.

Student Interest/Achievement

Student Interest/Achievement ranked fourth (32 percent*) in importance as a reason why parents withdrew their children from MCPS. Further, satisfaction with MCPS academic standards was low (13 percent, "very satisfied" and 46 percent, "satisfied") when compared with the level of satisfaction expressed about this topic in the private schools (79 percent, "very satisfied" and 19 percent "satisfied"). Most of the dissatisfaction expressed about MCPS related to parents' assertions that academic standards were too low or nonexistent.

Curriculum

Reasons related to the Curriculum ranked fifth (28.6 percent*) among the reasons parents gave for withdrawing their children from MCPS and most of the suggestions for improvements in MCPS curriculum called for more structure, more challenging work, higher standards, and more follow-up on homework.

Further, MCPS received a very low satisfaction rating in Giving Homework. The most frequent criticism was that little or no homework was assigned.

Integration

Integration ranked eighth (3 percent) as a cause for children being transferred from MCPS to nonpublic schools. Significantly, none of the minority families cited reasons classified as "Integration" for transferring their children to private schools. This reason was mentioned by only 3 percent* of parents at the elementary level and only 2 percent* at the senior high school level. No parents at the junior high school level cited this reason.

CHARACTERISTICS OF PARENTS

The study also looked at some of the other characteristics of families who have withdrawn their children from the public schools. Findings are summarized below:

- Although a large number of the families surveyed (78 percent) had more than one school-aged child, surprisingly, 43 percent of the families who withdrew a child to attend a nonpublic school had at least one child continuing to attend MCPS schools.

- Half (50 percent) of the mothers and 40 percent of the fathers had attended nonpublic schools for part or all of their elementary or secondary education.

- Parents who took their children out of MCPS were themselves well educated and were, in fact, more highly educated than the overall population in Montgomery County. Advanced degress were held by 28 percent of the minority parents and 18 percent of the white parents.

POLICIES OF BOARD OF EDUCATION

During the course of the study, no single Board of Education policy was found to be the motivating factor which caused parents to withdraw their children and place them in private schools. In fact, many of the policies enacted by the Board of Education over the past five years seem to be directly focused on parents' reasons for withdrawal (i.e., policies on class size, discipline, homework). The conservative nature of recent Boards of Education appears to be supported by the results of this study, in that, the concerns and dissatisfactions of the parents surveyed are very much in line with the directions of the Board of Education.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The findings from this study are very similar to other analyses of educational trends that have recently been emerging. The public appears to want an educational system strong in basics, strong in discipline, and strong in moral values. However, the finding is intriguing that nearly half (43%) of the families who withdraw a child from the public schools have at least one other child whose public school enrollment is continued. It would be extremely interesting to be able to explore whether or not there are systematic differences in age, sex, etc., between such children. Unfortunately, we do not have the necessary data for pursuing the past further as part of the current study. However, it is an important finding to keep in mind designing future investigations. Further, it clearly affects the interpretation of the data reported here.

We are still in the process of thinking about what the current findings mean for educational policy makers. However, it is clear that at least one finding, the importance of religion/values, poses quite a predicament for school administrators. To review, the study found that the area of religion/values seems to play an extremely important role in affecting decisions regarding withdrawal from the public schools. Further, a substantial number (82%) of those who withdrew their children from public school placed them in church related schools. Whether and how the public schools could in the future meet the needs of these parents is quite problematic. Schools must walk a very thin line when entering the arena of religion/values. Clearly religious instruction is not a part of the role of public education. And we have seen increasingly that religious celebrations which appear at all sectarian are being eliminated from the schools. The area of values is perhaps an even more difficult one with which to deal, as there is not a single agreed upon set of values to teach. Where schools have ventured into areas that border on "values education" the public reaction has sometimes been strong and negative. We have seen for example that "sex education" courses have become the object of controversy because of they come close to dealing with values and venture into areas some people feel are beyond the schools' mandate. This clearly creates a serious dilemma. Given these facts and the substantial proportion of parents who withdraw their children from public school to seek greater emphasis on religion and values, the capacity of schools to change current trends may be extremely limited.

In light of these findings it is very important to look now at a group of private school parents not addressed in this study--parents who place their children in private schools from the very beginning and keep them there. This group is far larger than those who withdraw their children from the public schools. Will these parents give the same reasons for their enrollment preferences? Is there anything the public school system can reasonably do to attempt to attract this sector?

APPENDIX A

Appendix A

Reasons for Transferring From MCPS
to a Nonpublic School*

Reasons	Total Responding N = 308
Discipline	52.9%
Lack of discipline	
Open classrooms/lack of structured behavior	
Drug abuse	
Inadequate supervision	
Victimization or intimidation of the child	
Permissiveness	
Lack of respect/abusive language	
Crime or vandalism in the school	
Inadequate follow-up on unexcused absences	
Suspension/expulsion	
Student Interest and Achievement	32.1%
Unsatisfactory progress or grades in school	
Student not challenged/not pushed to do his or her best	
Unhappy in school/poor self-image/fearful/emotional handicap	
Student lacked interest/motivation/self-discipline	
Student wanted to go to private school	
To develop different friendships	
Disagreement with school policy of passing children even if they are not learning	
To allow child to repeat a grade in a different setting	
School/MCPS Staff	13.0%
Dissatisfied with teacher	
Dissatisfied with school administrators or counselors	
Teacher inefficient or lacked interest	
Teacher did not like or care about the child	
Teacher insensitivity to children	
Too much teacher turnover/absence-too many substitutes	
Negative teacher attitude inappropriate behavior	
Teacher recommended a transfer to nonpublic school	
Class Size/Individualization	3?.7%
Not enough individualization/not meeting the child's needs/not enough teachers	
School/class size too large	
Inadequate facilities/programs/teachers for a learning disabled child	
Improper handling of child's problems	
Not enough attention to the average child	

(Continued)

Reasons	Total Responding N = 308
Curriculum	28.6%
Low academic standards/absence of academic emphasis	
Curriculum content lacked breadth/quality/or was inappropriate	
Lack of emphasis on basic skills	
Lack of structure in the curriculum	
Seeking a challenging college prepatory curriculum	
Absence of/not enough homework--no follow-up on assigned work	
Sensed a deterioration of the academic program or educational standards	
Lack of emphasis on study skills/how to learn	
Parent Involvement	7.1%
Inadequate communication or unsatisfactory relationship between parents and the school/MCPS staff	
Inadequate attention to parents' concerns	
School failure to contact parents concerning poor grades or behavioral problems	
Poor attitude/lack of cooperation on the part of MCPS	
School situation causing family turmoil	
Failure of schools to return calls	
Religion/Values	43.5%
To provide a religious education	
Undesirable social situation/different value system	
Absence of moral and ethical standards/character building	
Absence of prayer/God in the schools	
School's overconcern with social and psychological aspects of behavior	
Integration	2.6%
Racial prejudice/discrimination/reverse discrimination	
Busing out of neighborhood/prefer neighborhood schools	
Decline of school standards after busing	
Other	37.3%
To provide a better all-around situation for the child/a better education	
Anticipated problems in transition to another school (different level or school closure)	
Convenience: unify family schedules, transportation, and holidays	

(Continued)

Reasons	Total Responding N = 308
Moving residence/tuition requirement	
General dissatisfaction with the classroom/school situation	
General disagreement with MCPS policies	
School atmosphere unsatisfactory/school dirty	
Required daycare/babysitter not available in MCPS	
To increase opportunity for acceptance in a better private school	
Inappropriateness of books or materials	
Father had attended the private school	
To learn native tongue	
No longer needed daycare	
Had to enter private school when accepted or not at all	
Not comfortable with walking to school	
Child alone because mother worked	
Other parents did not control their children	
Another environment was recommended, based on testing by a private agency	
Athletic experiences available at private school	

*Percentages based on multiple responses.

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